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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on selection of students and curricular programming in gifted education. A current emphasis on selection rather than identification of able learners, including culturally diverse able learners, is noted, as are new understandings of the nature of giftedness, including: giftedness is more than high intelligence; giftedness is largely developmental; there is no one psychological test that measures giftedness; giftedness needs special attention to be developed; and one does not need to speak English to be intelligent. Selection is best done when observation, authentic assessments, and actual tryouts in programs are used as well as traditional standardized tests. Principles of good gifted education programs are listed, including: (1) use of a variety of acceleration options; (2) use of a variety of enrichment options; (3) homogeneous grouping; (4) regular opportunities for creative expression; and (5) teaching that is cross-disciplinary, integrated, and reality-based. Characteristics of a good teacher of the gifted/talented are also briefly considered. (DB)

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ED 391 345

Finding and Cultivating Minority Gifted/Talented Students

by

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The education of Gifted and Talented students in the public schools has historically been marked by traditional identification methods, such as IQ and achievement tests, exclusivity by socioeconomic status, and the resultant under-representation of students from non-dominant ethnic groups (minorities) in gifted and talented (GT) programs, which Bernal (1984) has described as the "last bastion of segregation."

More recently, the shifting demographics of the United States have begun to force the issue: if we are going to have a competitive economic and intellectual advantage in the future, the "best and brightest" ethnic minorities must be found and properly educated. The questions posed by many educators, including those that come through Alternative Certification Programs (ACP), tend to revolve around two major points of confusion: selection of students and curricular programming.

In the years that have intervened since the first GT programs began in public schools in the 1930s, a number of new understandings about the nature of giftedness have also helped to provide a firm rationale for this inclusionary move:

1. First, giftedness is more than high intelligence. It also involves high levels creativity and a special type of motivation, the type that pursues complex goals fairly relentnessly and that seeks success far more than it fears failure.
2. Giftedness is largely developmental, and it can be lost and regained under certain circumstances, for example circumstances that profoundly affect an individual's level of motivation.
3. There is no one psychological test that measures giftedness per se. What is more, not achieving the right cut-score on an IQ test does not mean that one is not gifted. Many children do not

necessarily do well on standardized measures but grow up to be very gifted adults. Furthermore, there are different kinds of intelligence or intellectual functions besides general intelligence, or g, which is what is measured by most IQ tests.

4. The quest now is shifting to try to find very capable or able learners, and the goal of gifted education is being seen as producing a gifted adult.
5. Giftedness needs special attention to be developed. It has often been thought--and very able learners have been stereo-typed--that giftedness needs no special support, that "the gifted will always make it any way." Nothing could be further from the truth (Colangelo & Exum, 1979), since bright children must go through their developmental phases just as everyone else and frequently require the kind of special attention that the high levels of sensitivity as well as intelligence that flow from intelligence require, so that the developing youngsters be helped to deal with their capacities constructively.
6. One does not need to speak English to be intelligent! In the past, and indeed too often in the present, very bright children for whom English is a second language have been deprived of an appropriately challenging education until they have mastered English in the public schools in the United States (Barkan & Bernal, 1991). Several researchers (see Bernal, 1992, Frasier, 1992; Kitano, 1991) are even recommending that very bright children who are limited English proficient be cultivated as bilinguals in an optional, bilingual program of studies for gifted children.

Today the field of Gifted and Talented Education is tending to emphasize selection over identification, to focus upon finding able learners and assigning these to special programs for the gifted, and to value cultural diversity as yet another source of creativity, not the object of deracination. Futhermore, it is generally agreed that the goal of Gifted and Talented Education should not be merely to educate a child who is gifted to start with, but to produce a gifted young adult at the end of high school.

Selecting very able learners is not something which involves any great mystery. While it is true that standardized tests may assist us in this process, we need limit neither our vision nor our sensibilities by a scrupulous insistence on these measures alone. Observation, authentic assessments, and actual tryouts in programs for the gifted make a lot more sense for many children. It is not usually difficult to spot a child that learns easily and well!

Beyond this, there are several characteristics of good gifted and talented programs that should be taken into account, most notably the following:

1. Acceleration, including the compacting of the standard curriculum, and opportunities for quicker advancement through the grades, advanced placement courses, honors courses, and close working relationships with a facilitating teacher or mentor are all very important.
2. Enrichment, particularly non-standard opportunities to learn, such as mentoring, travel, and education in modern languages.
3. Grouping of very able learners together so that they would have the opportunity to learn not only from a teacher who is professionally inclined to work with such children but also to

learn from one another.

4. Creative expression, the most essential element of all, is to give gifted children the opportunity to create, to critique their own work, and to learn from their failures, just as gifted adults do. Indeed, Bernal (1990) feels so strongly about this matter that he says that a program that does not give bright children regular opportunities to create is not a program from the gifted at all!
5. That teaching--particularly at the elementary grades--be cross-disciplinary, integrated, and reality-based (McIntosh, Journal, & Meacham, 1992) in large enough units that the teacher's creativity is also challenged. The idea here is to design real learning opportunities of complex topics that make children's realities more understandable. Thematic units that are reality-based are inheritly more motivating for children, and intellectual rigor and good content can be acquired, bringing the skills of different academic disciplines to bear on such topics. Children in gifted courses may be urged to tackle as a class project a problem that exists within their school or their neighborhood, to study it, to do surveys, to learn the necessary statistics to summarize and make sense the data, to do interviews, to write the results into well organized, effective reports, and to prepare oral presentations to real stakeholders, including school officials and even other students in the same school, and possibly parents as well. In such units math, reading, writing, and special skills such as the construction of questionnaires, the utilization of statistics and graphic displays and other computer software, such as word processing, public speaking

along with useful in-class skills, such as cooperation in the division of labor, can be simultaneously cultivated.

In short, good gifted and talented education is developmentally appropriate teaching and learning, although usually at an advanced level. And the teacher of the gifted is the GT program's most important element (Colangelo & Exum, 1979).

Are you a potential GT teacher? Although teachers of gifted students need not themselves be gifted, they do need to have certain characteristics which are critical to their success. First and foremost, a teacher of the gifted must be intellectual, must enjoy using the mind and watching others perform at extraordinary levels. A teacher of the gifted must never lie: the teacher may decide not to divulge certain information--may not answer a student's question, for example--but must never lie, since gifted students as a group will always have a few who are extraordinarily perceptive, and a lie will only destroy your credibility in the area of moral leadership. Third, a teacher must be very comfortable with the notion of a role as facilitator, not always as the sole dispenser of knowledge in the classroom. Another way of saying this is that a successful teacher of the gifted must sometimes let the students take the lead, must be comfortable with the fact that occasionally he or she will encounter a student who knows much more about a particular topic than does the teacher. Finally, a teacher of the gifted must have an incredible sense of humor, since the interaction with very bright but younger students will often make the relations which she wishes to establish with the students recipocal, for example, students will voluntarily correct her/his mistakes, just as the teacher corrects theirs. Furthermore, there has to be the excitement of learning together at certain times with the students, and this opens the possibility that teachers will make a mistake along with their students as they learn together by bringing out the "humanity" and

making her/him vulnerable, as it were.

In short, a teacher of the gifted must be an intellectual with a great dose of good mental health.

In conclusion, the education of gifted and talented children should be exciting as well as challenging. When it is well done, the children are not the only ones who reap the rewards of a job well done.

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